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ABSTRACT

This paper presents seven signs or abilities that delineate a successful speller: a systematic method of approach to words, use of adequate methods of learning new words, mastery of the most common words, independence in using the dictionary, consciousness of word construction, use of a linguistic approach to regular and irregular spellings, and acceptance of individual responsibility for correct spelling. (Author/RL)

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Seven Signs of a Successful Speller

In these days when the public is asking, "Why can't Johnny write?" educators are becoming increasingly conscious of the need for a broader and more effective spelling program. Nevertheless, the success of a spelling program cannot be measured by the number of six-syllable words the best speller in a class can spell orally. Rather, the effectiveness is determined by the degree of success which the average speller achieves in writing and spelling.

By what signs then shall we know the student who succeeds in spelling? Basic to the remarks herein made is the assumption that the learner is a normal person and is reasonably free from mental and physical handicaps which might preclude spelling success. We may center our discussion around seven signs or abilities: (1) systematic method of approach, (2) adequate methods of attacking the learning of new words, (3) mastery of the most common words, (4) independence in using the dictionary, (5) consciousness of how words are constructed, (6) discovery of regular and irregular spellings, and (7) individual acceptance of responsibility for correct spelling as a means of communication with and consideration for other people.

Sign one. In general, research has found no one "best" method by which all students learn to spell. Research has revealed however that the best spellers have a systematic method of approaching new words, that their eye movements are quite regular, and that they perceive the parts of a word in relation to the whole. On the other hand, poor spellers commonly go at a task in a hit-and-miss fashion.

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Sign two. Learning to spell is a complex matter involving seeing the word distinctly, hearing it clearly, comparing what one sees with what one hears as in often or reign, recalling the word, writing the word, knowing the meaning of it in the context of one's own written expression. Here then are the pieces in the pattern whereby a student becomes a successful speller: (a) he looks at the word closely, (b) he pronounces the word accurately, (c) he analyzes the word carefully, (d) he writes the word, (e) he compares his written word with the copy, and (f) he practices writing the word.

Sign three. The successful speller, regardless of the grade in which he is enrolled, learns the simple, most used words first. Considerable research has been carried on to determine what words are most useful in the writing of children and adults. James A. Fitzgerald's list of 2650 words, compiled from the most useful research of adult writing and most important investigations of children's writing, contains the words which are used most often by children in and out of school and which will be used by them as they develop from childhood to adulthood. Accordingly, the traditional spelling program for the elementary grades is comprised of 3 or 4 thousand words.

Interestingly enough, data which have been compiled by several investigators indicate the importance of a relatively small list of words for writing. Children, as well as adults, use a few words over and over, even though the total number of words they use is considerable in number (a conservative estimate of a person's lifetime writing needs is 10,000 words). Be that as it may, Henry D. Rinsland found that 200 words constitute over 71 percent of an average child's word usage. Furthermore Rinsland found that 2000 most used words comprised with their repetitions over 95 percent of the total running writing. Research reveals also that some college graduates at work in various professions use three hundred times as many words as persons who leave school at the end of the fourth grade.

Sign four. The successful speller, since he understands the organization of the dictionary and its special features, develops independence in using the dictionary. In fact, with him the dictionary habit is a normal part of learning instead of a detour. Authorities seem to agree that "the most important single help in the self-mastery of words is the dictionary."

Love of language is innate, and young people are the best consumers for words. One word leads to another. The pupil goes to the dictionary for a word and comes away with an armload; he can never really learn one word without learning many more. To cite examples, the student enjoys history when he ties up the word curriculum with chariot races, or the word maudlin with the religious plays of the Middle Ages. As Ralph Waldo Emerson puts it, "Neither is a dictionary a bad book to read. There is no cant in it, no excess of explanation, and it is full of suggestions - the raw material of possible poems and histories."

Sign five. The decrease in number of students taking foreign language, particularly Latin, has removed from our curriculum the proverbial "instructional crutch" for increased verbal sensitivity and word analysis. The successful speller learns the secret of adding endings, forming plurals, using prefixes and suffixes. He learns that many polysyllabic words are made up of base or root words with added elements. Consequently he finds it advantageous to keep a weather eye out for Greek and Latin roots, prefixes, and suffixes and to become conscious of the meanings of the parts. In addition, he experiences the satisfaction of becoming a wordsmith. For example, he may add new words to his vocabulary by joining a stem or root word with one or several of the fourteen most common prefixes:

ab(from)	dis(apart)	in (into)	sub (under)
ad(to)	en (in)	pre (before)	un (not)
be(by)	ex(out)	pro (in front of)	
com(with)	in(not)	re (back)	

Sign six. We may digress for a moment and note that the late George Bernard Shaw wrote in several places that the chief deficiency of the English language was its absurdly inconsistent spelling system, which explained why "the English can't teach their children now to speak." Shaw therefore endorsed a "one-sound-one-letter new English alphabet." As he stated, "There is no alternative but to design 24 new consonants, 18 new vowels, making in all a new alphabet of 42 letters. The new alphabet must be so different from the old that no one could possibly mistake the new spelling for the old. This disposes of all the attempts at simplified spelling with the old alphabet."

However, until we know this new alphabet, the successful speller learns and employs those phonetic principles that have the highest degree of regularity. Paul R. Hanna and James T. Moore found that for almost every speech sound there is a highly regular spelling. Statistics on the Hanna-moore findings are:

1. The b, d, hard g, h, l, m, n, p, r, and t sounds are spelled regularly about 90 percent of the time.

2. The double consonant (bb, dd, mm, etc.) occurs less than 1 percent of the time.

3. About 82 percent of the consonant blends (bl, gl, gr, cl, etc.) are spelled regularly.

4. About 75 percent of the vowel phonemes are regular in spelling 60 to 90 percent of the time. The vowel phoneme, the short "a," is among those that have the highest relative spelling consistency.

In the linguistic approach, the student gives attention first to the sound, for example, short i. Then he discovers words having that sound: hit, sieve, England, marriage, been, women, busy, pulley, myth, chamois. Research tells us that students who are taught to discover patterns or "sets" are able to spell from 6,000 to 12,000 words, depending, of course, upon the person's oral vocabulary.

Sign seven. "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink," is true of learning to spell. Parents or teachers can insist that students sit

down and look at the words, but it is the student that makes the mental connection enabling him to spell the word. The successful speller then possesses the little spark that sets the mental motor in motion -- it is a real desire to spell correctly. As Gertrude Hildreth has written, "The chief criterion of successful achievement in spelling is the extent to which the child can help himself achieve correct spelling."

"The object of teaching a child," says Elbert Hubbard, "is to enable him to get along without his teacher." Being independent, the successful speller develops a real desire to write correctly, and he knows how to check his own writing and to correct his own errors. Obviously, it is impossible for anyone to learn in school all the words needed in a lifetime. Dr. Samuel Johnson's great dictionary (1755) included 50,000 words. Noah Webster's prestigious An American Dictionary of the English Language (1828) included 70,000 words; whereas our unabridged dictionaries include more than 500,000 entries. Between the Second Edition and the Third of Webster's New International Dictionary, over 100,000 new words and new meanings were added to the English language. The textile industry alone was responsible for some twenty pages of words added to the English language. The successful speller, we may note and emphasize, masters the words in the spelling lesson and goes on to the mastery of the many other words he needs in writing and communication.

Good spelling does communicate, and communication is a way by which pupils understand people, their actions and thoughts. Rollo May, a practicing psychotherapist in New York and a training and supervisory analyst in the William Alanson White Institute observes that when communication breaks down, one is like a man dreaming about wandering in a foreign land where he cannot understand what is being said, where he feels nothing, and where he is truly isolated. Particularly startling is Rollo May's observation that aggression and violence occur when the possibilities for communication break down.

In conclusion, a speller is successful to the extent that he is systematic in his approach to words; acquires adequate methods of attacking new words; masters the spelling of the most used words; is skillful in using the dictionary; is conscious of word construction; discovers the linguistic approach to regular and irregular spellings; and as an individual accepts responsibility for writing the letters in the right order so that he may communicate better with his peers, with his teachers, and with his parents.

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